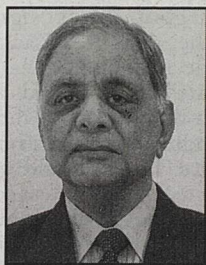


The Roller Coaster Journey Of India-U.S. Relations

—By Wing Commander Dinesh Mathur, VSM (Retd.)

We know that Group Discussion (GD) is a time-tested and comprehensive technique for adequately assessing a candidate's suitability for admission, scholarships, campus placements, and entry-level jobs, among other purposes. Assessors find it easy to organise a Group Discussion that provides a platform to candidates to express their views on a given subject when they are part of a simulated group situation. In this manner, candidates are allowed to participate in a group activity. When they do so, assessors get opportunity to gain insight into a candidate's overall personality, thought process, awareness, communication skills, leadership traits, and, most significantly, his/her group behaviour. While candidates are required to have domain knowledge of their field, they must also possess the ability to work in a group, either as a leader or as a member. The Group Discussion technique is a very effective way to assess a candidate's ability to work in a group. While candidates express their views in a GD, they also willy-nilly reveal how open-minded they are, whether they possess problem-solving and critical thinking skills, flexibility in accepting others' points of view, social attitude and self-confidence, and time management skills, etc.

Several well-known management institutes conduct Group Discussions as part of the selection process to shortlist candidates for admission to their prestigious MBA Programs. The above topic was picked up by a group of such candidates, who were called to participate in a GD conducted for the same purpose. Candidates arrived at the venue for the GD formally attired and were seated in a semi-circle seating arrangement. They were allotted Identity Numbers, which were duly displayed on their shirts. Candidates were asked to address each other by these numbers and avoid calling one another by name. This followed a detailed briefing by the three assessors on the conduct of this Group Discussion. The assessors informed the candidates that they would not interfere in the conduct of this discussion, and candidates had the liberty to speak as much as they wanted at any point in this discussion. They were given five minutes to prepare and recall some points on this topic, which they could jot down and refer to during the GD. Finally, they were told



Wing Commander Dinesh Mathur is a senior selector and trainer. He has worked as a selector at two Services Selection Boards and as Chief Instructor at Defence Institute of Psychological Research, New Delhi. He has conducted many Interviews and Group Discussions during the last two decades and has authored four books, including two on Interviews and Group Discussions. He has received Vishisht Seva Medal awarded by the President of India and Commendation by the Chief of Air Staff.

that they had to conclude the discussion within 25-30 minutes.

Subsequently, the Group Discussion commenced as follows:

Candidate No. 1 : Good morning, friends. India and the United States (U.S.) share one of the most important bilateral partnerships of the 21st century. We are aware that India-U.S. relations are currently being discussed in almost all forums in our country. While the present worrisome state of India-U.S. relations is hurting quite a few Indians, one way or the other, the fact remains that these relations have had many highs and lows in the past as well. Some people feel that the present period of India-U.S. relations is perhaps regrettably the worst. But it is not so. These relations have gone through much darker times in the past. This is relevant because India-U.S. relationship is a broad, multi-sectoral partnership built on shared democratic values, strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific, and robust economic and technological ties. To be specific, this relationship is based on a comprehensive framework for cooperation in areas like trade, investment, defence, critical and emerging technologies, and the NASA-ISRO space forays, etc. A large number of the Indian American community, composed of highly skilled professionals and entrepreneurs, serves as a significant bridge, strengthening this

bilateral relationship. Currently, under President Mr. Donald Trump, unfortunately, this relationship has seen a new low. As per the topic selected by us, we need to look at this relationship in a comprehensive manner. I know you are keen to express your view. Please go ahead. Thanks.

Candidate No. 8 : Thanks, Number 1, for your detailed introduction. As this topic is quite broad in its coverage, before we begin discussing it, we should decide on its format.

Candidate No. 2 : Yes, you are right. This topic has to be discussed in its historical perspective. I suggest that we discuss India-U.S. relations, covering the period from India's independence until the present day. I think that will do justice to this topic. I am sure that discussing this topic in this format would help us appreciate the nuances of this relationship more comprehensively. Do you all agree?

Candidate No. 10 : Yes, I agree with you. That should be our approach. Let's go ahead.

Candidate No. 4 : Friends, I can discuss this relationship during the period from 1947 to 1960. Immediately after India gained independence in 1947, the United States viewed India as a crucial democratic partner in Asia. However, this relationship soon became complicated during the Cold War as the U.S. strongly aligned with Pakistan, viewing it as a frontline ally against the then Soviet Union. In 1949, India's then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru toured the U.S. and later declared neutrality in the Cold War. Nehru also assumed leadership of the Non-Aligned Movement, seeking to maintain an impartial position between the U.S. and the then Soviet Union. During this period, Nehru was duly recognised as a statesman and an important leader in Asia. However, a behind-the-scenes strategic tussle between the U.S. and the then Soviet Union continued.

Candidate No. 5 : Very well covered, Number 4.

Candidate No. 6 : In fact, the 1960s saw both highs and lows of India-U.S. relations. The big bright spot in this relationship during the Cold War was evident during the 1962 India-China border war. India faced a sudden Chinese attack, and at this time, Prime Minister Nehru approached the then American President John F. Kennedy for support. President Kennedy willingly and promptly

agreed and recognised the McMahon Line as the border between India and China. America also provided air support and arms to Indian troops. Not only this, America also messaged China through contacts in Warsaw that it was firmly with India and would not hesitate to intervene on its behalf. President Kennedy's full support during this time of national crisis for India made him hugely popular in India, and this period is rightly considered a big bright spot in India-U.S. ties. During this period, Prime Minister Nehru and President Kennedy had very good personal relations as well.

Candidate No. 9 : Let me add, these good times did not last long, and this goodwill also quickly eroded. The unfortunate assassination of President Kennedy in November 1963 and the 1965 war between India and Pakistan were considered responsible for this new situation. The U.S. stopped supplying military aid to both India and Pakistan. Furthermore, the China-Soviet split within the communist bloc provided the U.S. with sufficient reasons to collaborate with Pakistan in addressing China as well. It was at this point that it was noticed that New Delhi and Washington had drifted apart. Subsequently, America and India continued to fall apart, and America tilted towards Pakistan.

Candidate No. 1 : Yes, India-U.S. relations were at their lowest ebb when America supported Pakistan during the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War. This occurred during the tenure of the then American President Richard Nixon and his Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger. The U.S. even dispatched its Navy's 7th Fleet, which was the largest and most powerful American forward-deployed fleet, to threaten India to stop its operation against Pakistan. However, the then Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi boldly faced this threat and continued the operation to liberate Bangladesh. However, despite such severe problems, India, under the strong leadership of Indira Gandhi, won the war against Pakistan, and Bangladesh became an independent country.

Candidate No. 8 : Yes, you are right. This was a turning point in India-U.S. relations, and India subsequently tilted towards Russia. This relationship culminated in the 1971 Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship, and Cooperation.

Candidate No. 4 : Friends, I wanted to point out that, despite a downward trend in relations between India and America, there was also a notable high point in this relationship. American scientist Norman Borlaugh is revered in India for his instrumental role in India's Green Revolution, where his high-yielding, semi-dwarf wheat varieties helped India achieve self-sufficiency in food production in the 1960s and 1970s. He worked closely with Indian scientists, notably Dr. M.S. Swaminathan and

visited India frequently to encourage Indian farmers and scientists, boosting their confidence and promoting home-grown food security.

Candidate No. 2 : Yes, I agree with you that Borlaugh's efforts are rightly credited with saving millions from starvation and transforming India from a food-deficient nation to one capable of feeding its own population. This certainly is a good example of fruitful cooperation between India and the U.S.A.

Candidate No. 7 : Yes, you are right. However, geopolitics significantly hindered the chances of another tech boom for decades.

Candidate No. 6 : Friends, let's move forward. In the year 1974, the then PM Indira Gandhi took an extremely bold decision that India should go nuclear and conducted a nuclear test codenamed "Smiling Buddha", which is also known as Pokhran-I. This development irritated America a lot as it feared nuclear proliferation. It rallied major nuclear suppliers to establish the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG), which imposed highly restricted safeguards and export controls. This adversely impacted India's nuclear programme. Subsequently, under the then-Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, India again conducted a series of five nuclear weapon tests in 1998 as part of 'Operation Shakti' (Pokhran-II) and declared itself a full-fledged nuclear power. Thereupon, the then American President Mr. Bill Clinton imposed sanctions, including economic and defence ones. Not only this, the U.S. had also arm-twisted Russia to withhold the transfer of cryogenic engine technology in the 1990s. The U.S. Congress passed strict non-proliferation laws, further straining India-U.S. ties.

Candidate No. 8 : As you can see, owing to all these reasons, this period was the time when there was a nuclear divide and strategic suspicion (1970s-1990s) between India and the U.S. and has, therefore, been labelled as the Nuclear Low period in the India-U.S. relations.

Candidate No. 9 : Let me add that India's deepening partnership with the then-Soviet Union reinforced American suspicion. Thereafter, during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, the U.S. once again improved its relations with Pakistan, increasing aid and arms to support the Afghan resistance. Therefore, we can say that this period was also marked by mutual distrust between India and the U.S. Due to all these developments, India considered the U.S. to be rather inconsistent and clearly biased towards Pakistan. At the same time, the U.S. also perceived India as leaning too heavily towards the U.S.S.R. So, we cannot label this period as a good period for India-U.S. relations, either.

Candidate No. 1 : But, friends, international politics barely remains static, and the subsequent period again opened

new possibilities for improvement in India-U.S. relations. In the 1990s, we saw the end of the Cold War and also the sudden collapse of the U.S.S.R., which certainly was a dramatic historical development in international politics. Since India had close bilateral and strategic relations with the U.S.S.R. at that time, it had to review its foreign policy in view of this development. Moreover, due to uncertainties there, the Russian supplies of significant military equipment to India were dwindling, causing some anxious moments in India.

Candidate No. 3 : Yes, certainly, the sudden collapse of the U.S.S.R. was a significant historical event that also had a profound impact on India.

Candidate No. 4 : I would like to add that this period, i.e., after 1991, also witnessed economic liberalisation, which made India more attractive to the U.S. as a trading and investment partner. However, the India-U.S. friction created after India's nuclear test in 1998, still persisted when America had imposed sanctions on India. However, it goes to the credit of both Indian and American quiet diplomacy that tensions were controlled. In this regard, dialogues between the then Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and the then-American President Mr. Bill Clinton laid the groundwork for a new chapter in India-America relations. This eventually led to a new strategic partnership between the two countries in the coming period.

Candidate No. 5 : It is quite interesting to know that relations between India and the U.S. have witnessed so many highs and lows.

Candidate No. 2 : Friends, I suggest that we move to the 21st century and comment on the relations between India and the U.S. during this period.

Candidate No. 6 : Yes, the 21st century witnessed a remarkable turnaround. The early 2000s saw both India and the U.S. recognise shared interests in democracy, counter-terrorism, and economic growth. During this period, we saw the terror attack of 9/11 and the American military intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq. Also, eventually, China joined the WTO. At this point, America was looking for friends, and the then President Mr. George W. Bush was inclined to improve relations with India. At this point, both India and America described themselves as "natural allies". These developments clearly indicated that relations between the two nations were set to improve.

Candidate No. 9 : Yes, quite right. This resulted in vast improvement in the India-U.S. ties, culminating in the '123 Agreement' signed in 2008 by the then Indian PM Dr. Manmohan Singh and then U.S. President Mr. George W. Bush. We know the 123 Agreement was the India-United States Civil Nuclear Agreement, which allowed for civilian

nuclear cooperation between the two nations following India's voluntary moratorium on nuclear weapons testing and its agreement to place its civilian nuclear facilities under the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) safeguards. This effectively checked India's nuclear isolation, while America denied a similar pact to Pakistan.

Candidate No. 1 : Let me add that the 123 Agreement gave support to India across the U.S. political spectrum and opened the door for U.S. companies to sell nuclear fuel, technology, and reactors to India for its civilian energy programme. Further, this agreement led to the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) waiver, allowing other nations to sell nuclear fuel and technology to India, lifting a three-decade technological denial regime and ending India's nuclear isolation. Subsequently, defence cooperation between the two countries continued to expand, and India began purchasing advanced military hardware from the U.S. Joint military exercises increased in scale and complexity. Further, economically, bilateral trade grew steadily, and the Indian IT sector found a huge market in the U.S.

Candidate No. 10 : Yes, quite right. During this period, it is evident that relations between the two countries improved significantly.

Candidate No. 4 : Right. People-to-people contact continued to improve, as there were significant educational exchanges with a large number of students from India travelling to America for studies. Quite a few of them stayed back in the U.S., having secured a job commensurate with their technical qualifications. Thus, there was a strong diaspora influence. Meanwhile, America became India's major supplier of arms and other equipment. Strategically, US needed India to counter China in Asia, particularly in the Indo-Pacific. Economic synergy was also evident in the growing trade and investment partnerships.

Candidate No. 8 : Yes, during this period, although some conflicts of interest persisted between the two countries, both nations continued to maintain their good bilateral relationship.

Candidate No. 2 : Friends, we should now shift to the India-U.S. relationship in the contemporary phase, I mean, from the 2010s to the present period. This will be the last phase of our discussion. Do you agree?

Candidate No. 6 : Yes, I agree. Let me talk about this period. Over the last decade, India-U.S. relations have expanded in breadth and depth, although certainly not without tensions. Initiatives such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), involving India, the U.S., Japan, and Australia, signalled strategic agreement on maintaining a free,

open, and rules-based order in Asia, especially in response to China's assertiveness and dominance. Several defence agreements were also signed, increasing cooperation between the two countries' armed forces. Meanwhile, America also emerged as India's largest trading partner, and the Indian diaspora in the U.S. increased to more than four million, which played a vital role in improving people-to-people relationships.

Candidate No. 9 : That's true, but frictions like trade disputes, visa restrictions, and America's arms support to Pakistan continued. America's expectations occasionally clashed with India's efforts to maintain its strategic autonomy. India's continued purchase of Russian defence equipment was also not liked by America. However, the relations between the two countries reached a new low during U.S. President Mr. Trump's second term.

Candidate No. 1 : Yes, the moment the U.S. elected President Mr. Trump, things changed dramatically. Even during his first instinct, he was not in favour of India having any leeway as a developing country. Though India celebrated Mr. Trump's second time arrival in the White House, it was in for a big surprise. America was critical of India's purchase of Russian crude oil and did not appreciate India's stand of not being directly critical of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The India-U.S. trade deal was not finalised despite long negotiations, and America imposed very heavy tariffs (50%) on Indian goods, and even called India a 'tariff king'. Levying such huge tariffs certainly caused a big rift between India and the U.S.

Candidate No. 7 : It is certainly a very bad period for India-U.S. relations.

Candidate No. 4 : Yes, for India, this current situation is more than a trade challenge as America is seeking strategic realignment. Presently, Pakistan is luring Mr. Trump with new promises. Mr. Trump also did not appreciate India's stand of not giving him credit for his alleged role in bringing about the Indo-Pak ceasefire after Operation Sindoor. With all these developments, relations between the two countries have been damaged beyond early repair. Keeping in view the mercurial nature of President Mr. Trump, India needs to deal with this critical situation with patience and finalise the trade deal, keeping our national interest in view. The U.S. is trying to bleed and browbeat India into abandoning its independent foreign policy of multi-alignment, which India must resist.

Candidate No. 6 : Friends, the time given to us for this discussion is over. Let's conclude now.

Candidate No. 9 : If you agree, I can conclude.

Candidate No. 6 : Please go ahead.

Candidate No. 9 : We had a very informative and interesting discussion on

this currently hot topic. We discussed India-U.S. relations from the time India became independent to the present day. It was highlighted that at the beginning of this period, America viewed India positively as a large democratic nation in Asia. But later, the U.S. aligned with Pakistan as India pursued a policy of non-alignment during the Cold War. During India's war with China in 1962, America supported India. However, India's relations with the U.S. deteriorated terribly during the Bangladesh liberation war in 1971. Later, America strongly opposed India's nuclear tests in 1974 and 1998. In the 21st century, relations again improved, which led to the India-U.S. '123 Agreement' in 2008. We highlighted that when President Mr. Trump took over for a second term in 2025, these relations saw a new low and will take some time to normalise. Thus, we discussed almost all the lows and highs of India-U.S. relations in a comprehensive manner. That's all, friends.

Have a nice day.

Critical Analysis Of Candidates' Performance:

Good : 1, 4, 6 and 9

It emerged that these candidates participated in this Group Discussion in a more constructive and meaningful manner compared to other candidates. They had collected sufficient data and information on this topic before coming for this discussion. They spoke with confidence, while also allowing other candidates to contribute. They presented an adequate amount of new information on this subject, which made this interaction fruitful and interesting, while other candidates did not dispute the same. Owing to these facts, their performance has been assessed as 'Good'.

Average : 2 and 8

These candidates also participated in this discussion and contributed by determining its format. However, as the discussion progressed, it became apparent that they did not possess sufficient amount of information to ensure a winning performance. Had they made some more efforts to prepare this topic, they could have certainly put up a much better performance. Moreover, due to the same reason, they also lacked self-confidence. In view of these facts, their performance has been evaluated as 'Average'.

Below the Average : 3, 5, 7 and 10

Contributions made by these candidates were barely noticed, since they did not provide much information on this topic during this discussion. Merely to get noticed, they were only seen appreciating other candidates or agreeing with them. This much participation is certainly not considered adequate in a competitive Group Discussion like this one. Candidates are advised to prepare and collect a sufficient amount of information on significant national and international current affairs to ensure a winning performance. As a result, their performance has been assessed as 'Below the Average'.

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